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THE KHASI FESTIVAL OF 'POMBLANG'

S. BANERJEE

INTRODUCTION

The Khasi inhabit the upland of the central part of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district of Assam. They reckon descent through mother and the youngest daughter (Ka khadduh) of the house is the custodian of the ancestral property. Belief in the existence of spirits is strong among them and the causes of diseases are ascertained by taking recourse to the process of divination. They are ruled by different categories of Chief. The *Siem* is the highest official responsible for the administration of the state but a few small states are also governed by *Sirdars* with same powers as vested in the former although does not possess the same status. It is interesting to note that their priests whose rank is next to *Siem*, have also been allotted to perform this secular duties in some of the regions of the Khasi country. The Chief function through their respective council comprising elected members from different administrative units. He is rather subservient to this body as he is liable to be censured or even dismissed, if his activities are not in conformity with the Khasi traditional usage. Most of his directives are implemented through the assistance of his subordinates who are in-charge of various sections of the State. The Khasi place his grievance first to these junior officers for redress and justice, after which an appeal can be preferred to the *Siem* or any other higher officer as the case may be. One of the eminent States of the Khasi people known as Khyriem, where this festival is celebrated, consists of eight units for administrative convenience under the supervision of different grades of officials who participated in this celebration along with the *Siem* as representatives of the people.

The Khasi festival of *Pomblang* (Goat killing) described below used to be celebrated at one time in Shillong when the Khasi states of Khyriem and Mylliem were not separated. The first chief of the Khyriem state U Singh Manik shifted his headquarters to Nongkrem village after partition of the kingdom, which occurred before the arrival of the British. He again moved to Laneklerdem after a brief stay at the village of Lynthshing. He performed this festival as long as he was there, transferring it again to Nongkrem where he re-settled again. It was celebrated here for a long time and consequently it was named after this village. Although the ruling family had later on shifted its residence about sixty years ago to the present village Smit, during the time of U Klur Singh, *Siem*, it is performed regularly as *Nongkrem dance* which was observed by the author from 21st June to 25th June, 1955.

OBJECT OF THE FESTIVAL

It is being held every year since the days of U Shillong who was supposed to be the founder of original Khyriem State. They celebrate it to perpetuate his memory and pay homage with a view to ensure rain, good harvest, eliminating diseases and famine. He was worshipped along with other ancestors with view to guide the present Chief in his discharge of his duties and for the welfare of the people.

The house of *Siem* (*jing-sad*) where the rites are observed, is considered sacred. It consists of a big-hall (*shlur*) in the centre, surrounded by rooms. One of these on the north is used as a kitchen room (*jing-chetja*) where ritual

778 objects are stored while that of the vest (kynram blang) was meant exclusively
796 for sacrificial goats. There is a very big circular courtyard in front of the
building where the members of the royal family as also other boys and spinners
hold a ritual dance. The function is always held during the moonlit period of
[193] May or June and the actual dates are fixed in consultation with the Chief priest
[443] (Sohblei) in such a way that the first day—*Pamtiak** always coincides with the
[202] market day of Shillong Chota bazar. The dates of the festival is then com-
municated to the in-charge of different units of his territory, through a
wooden stick 'kyrwoh' having a few knots of cane-strips, as a form of summons
for attending the festival for five days at Smit along with subjects under their
jurisdiction.

IMPORTANT PARTICIPANT

796 The responsibility of performing this ritual rests on the High-priestess
793 (*Ka Siem Sad*) who is succeeded by her eldest daughter. Different ritual ob-
jects are procured by her, well in advance and it is obligatory on her part to
562 join the ceremonial dancing, in which her daughter may also officiate on her
[769] behalf. U Shillong is worshipped by the chief priest while the other ancestors
[533] are invoked by lesser priests. The musicians (*Dhulia*) besides their normal
duties, take part in the worship of the ancestors and they are presented with
silk turban, jacket, cloth, by the ruling family for the services rendered during
the festival. The *Siem* has no especial role except to supervise and evoke U
Shillong for the welfare of the community. He is required to perform certain
sacrifices, failing which his heir-apparent (*Siem kynmak*) does the same. He
along with his sister (High priestess) abstain from taking rice during the period
of celebration presumably to observe the sanctity of this festival as also to
ensure the successful conclusion of the function.

RITUAL MATERIALS

796 The festival derives its name from the sacrifice of a large number of goats
782 some of which were supplied from the State fund and from different units of
231 the territory. Formerly at least fifty goats were required and each unit had
a specific allotment but owing to the economic difficulty that the Khasi are
experiencing, the number of goats sacrificed hardly exceeds twenty-five. The
goats collected from the different units, are presented to the Chief at the midnight
of the third day. Rice-beer, dried fish, fermented-rice, betel leaves together
[273] with nuts are also important ritual objects in this celebration.
[276]

DESCRIPTION OF THE FESTIVAL

796 The commencement of the festival was marked by the distribution of dried
782 fish (suit dokha) to the persons assembled on the occasion, in the evening of
Pamtiak (i.e. 21st June, 1957). This was followed by the dropping of rice-beer
by the Chief priest over the fire pan of central hall known as *Ka mit-ka cher*

[805] *A week consists of eight days in Khasi. Calendar the names are according to the place
where markets are held in Khasi Hills.

Name	Market
1. Pamtiak	Shillong Chota Bazar.
2. Umot	Barapeta.
3. Yaw-dak	Shillong Chota Bazar.
4. Lyngba	Barapeta.
5. Kynghom	Barapeta.
6. Mawlong	Laban (Shillong).
7. Syngap	Barapeta Chota Bazar.
8. Shillong	Labapeta.

JANUARY, 1956]

BANERJEE : KHASI FESTIVAL OF POMBLANG

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in which no sacrifice was made except this libation of this liquor in the name of U Shillong, Ka Biei Long Siem and U Suidnia. Subsequently, the Chief musician (Dhulia) worshipped another deity Ka Synchar, by holding a yellow cook in front of ritual offerings collected on a plantain leaf while his subordinates immediately shouted nine times in their traditional way. Redistribution of dry-fish and indigenous liquor to the people marked the end of the first day and the ceremonies performed on this day were repeated on the second day (Umni).

The sacrifice of goats which was an important feature of the festival, was performed in the afternoon of the third day (Yew duh) on the top of an adjacent hill where the Siem along with other members of his house, went there in a procession. The people shouted all the time while it was proceeding to that place. The musicians went round the altar first at the top of the hill thrice in anticipation of a happy and good augurs. The Chief priest facing the north, prayed to U Shillong holding a red-coloured cock in his right hand and killed it on the altar collecting its blood in a gourd vessel. The entrails of the cock were carefully examined by him and then kept on a silver plate. The Chief priest threw some grains of rice before him as also over the yellow goat and prayed to U Shillong holding a dah in his hand. He then passed on this implement to the Siem who also prayed to the deity. The Siem handed over the same to a man (nengnong) who sacrificed the goat on behalf of the Siem. He collected nine pieces of meat from different parts of the goat's body (e.g. heart, lungs, liver, stomach, kidney, etc.) and handed them over to the priest. The latter cut each piece of the meat into five parts and offered them to the five ancestors.* The procession returned to the Siem's residence when the head of the goat was brought back by a member of a Kharbamen clan. It was then given to the High-priestess for disposal of the same in a manner as she liked. The day's rituals were completed by performing the goat presentation ceremony in the midnight. The Chief musician stood very near the fire made in this occasion at the verandah (tyngkong) of the building and called the names of different units to present their gifts, in order of their seniority. The gathering that was watching from the courtyard shouted in their traditional way three times on receipt of the Siem's acceptance and the animals were led to the *Lymam-Nam* for overnight stay before which they were not considered fit to be sacrificed to be held on the day next.

On the evening of the fourth day (Lyngka) betel leaves and nuts were presented to the members of the Siem's family by the people wishing them happiness and prosperity. The chief priest took his seat in front of the verandah in a line along with his ten assistants who were on either side in a group of five facing the north. The Chief priest worshipped U Biei Shillong and Ka Biei-Long Siem and the responsibility of invoking each ancestor or ancestors was devolved on each assistant priest :

Asst. Priest	Chief Priest	Asst. Priest
1. U Dierger.	4. U Shillong.	8. U Phan Kyruhai.
2. U Maridon.	5. Ka Biei Long Siem.	9. U Shyong.
3. U Nam Shillong.		10. Ka Lei Dueta.
4. Ka Phan Siem Shillong.		11. Ka Siem Singi.
5. U Suidnia.		12. Ka Biei Synchar.

* (1) U Biei Shillong

(2) U Suidnia

(3) U Kpa & U Kha

(4) U Shyong

(5) U Biei Shyong

After Lyngka H.—The Pomblang Nongkum (in Khasi) 1946. Khasi & Jaintia Hills Press, Shillong.

796 The goats were sacrificed by his sister's eldest son (Siem-*liyanah*) and in
782 charge of respective units at the open courtyard. The priests evoked the
769 ancestors and ancestress and called upon them by name praying 'Oh God and
231 Goddess, I offer this sacrifice as our ancestors did. Bless the Siem, his family
and the people of his state. I shall beseech you again on this day after one
year. You create favourable weather by virtue of your power, bring clouds
and rains to yield bumper crops and ensure a happy and prosperous life.'

On the last day (Nongkrem), a man of Mawroh clan sacrificed a pig in-
troducing an iron spike in its left armpit. Nine pieces of meat from different
parts of the pig's body were again offered to their five ancestors. The Siem
in the presence of his *Darbar* performed the last item of festival by praying to
U Shillong, when the Chief of Rynjah clan also followed in the same way for
seeking the blessings of their Chief deity.

This brought the ritual to an end performed at the residence of Siem. The
five pieces of goat's and pig's meat offered to their five ancestors, were then
handed over to the in-charge of the five units considered as somewhat higher
in their State organisation. They distributed them at a suitable place in their
unit, making a feast as a sort of public declaration of the completion of their
greatest festival for the year.

DANCING

535 Besides the ritual described above, dance with the accompaniment of music
796 formed an important aspect of this festival. A dance known as *and-tyngksh*
(533) had been a regular feature for the first, second, third and fifth day. This dance
has some interesting features. It has to be performed in pairs. The first
pair was constituted by Chief priest and the Chief musician. Second to fifth
pairs were between the *Sindus* of the eight units after which *Siem* along with an
official of his council constituted the sixth pair. The subsequent pairs were
formed by any two persons from the gathering. They danced only after bowing
first before the Oak pillar (*Rishok*), then to *Siem* on the fifth day. This pairing
was then not adhered to on completion of the last rise of the festival.

A second type of dance (*kar nod mastiek*) was then performed in the court-
yard by the musicians as well as by the professional dancers (*nong-shid*) with
[291] *baud* and *dy-brush* in the afternoon of the third day. The dance was always
[301] held in pairs first by musicians, and then dancers, who donned their traditional
dress consisting of silk turban (*Jaingpang*) decorated with feathers, coloured
sleeveless coat (*lymphang*) silver chain and coral necklaces. Later on they
joined the procession, that went to the adjacent hill where after the completion
of the ceremony of goat killing, a group dance was performed returning to the
residence of Siem ultimately.

This dance (*nod-moldjar*) was performed by the Siema family. It was held
early in the morning of the fourth day in the central hall (*Shilur*) and also
in the courtyard. The men put on their normal dress whereas the women
[291] dressed themselves with gold and silver crowns (*gaxangiat*), numerous silver
[301] ornaments and different coloured blouses. They dressed and braided the
[302] hairs into a knot just at the nape. The High Priestess who also danced with
the members of the Siema family, stood in the middle of the line and chief
musician stood at one end. They held each other in hand and danced around
the fire-place of the central hall (*Shilur*) in anti-clock-wise direction in accom-
paniment of music. The people assembled there, gave vent to their feeling
in their customary way every time, before they resumed to make it three times.
Similar performance of dancers were also held in the courtyard.

JANUARY, 1956]

BAHARER : KHASI FESTIVAL ON POKHILANG

17

Then followed the dance of the girls (K) shad i yashet) who were also wearing dresses as described above. They kept their eyes down, keeping their arms on their sides taking such a short steps with the music, that the movement of the feet were hardly perceptible. The boys were also in their dancing dress as worn by *mongshad* and danced with *ky-brank* round the girls making their steps with the beatings of the drums. The music started from the morning would be stopped only after completion of the dance which prolonged till evening. These functions served as a good source of amusement to the people, enabling them to have a good diversion from their monotonous life with an opportunity to meet their friends and relations who assembled there from different parts of the hill.

DISCUSSION

From the foregoing description, it is evident that the Khasi live in a democratic set up in which the secular duties are entrusted to the *Siem*. A different rule is followed in the case of religious festivals. Every Khasi family entrusts the sacerdotal work of the house to the youngest daughter. The *Siem's* sister (*Siem Sad*) being the nearest brother of his mother's clan, is made responsible for the observance of those ceremonies which concern the welfare of the subjects. The people attend the festival to seek blessings of their supreme deity U Shilling and their presence in the *Siem's* residence indicates their loyalty to him. The rituals of the festival, instead of being performed by her (High Priestess), were conducted by the Chief Priest (*Sak Shih*) for which he was allotted a very important position in the celebration. The musicians were given similar status owing to the belief in the sacrosanctity of their music. It ought to be played in proper tones otherwise the displeasure of the deity would fall on them on finding any slight departure in this respect. For this reason, the music is considered as important as the rituals and the role of musicians were consequently given due recognition at every stage of the festival. The tradition of depositing one portion of *Nongrong* (rice) to sacrifice the goat at the top of the hill was followed on account of their customers having carried out in older times the profession of *shid-bong* (body guard) to the *Siem*. Another portion of *shid-bong* (rice) was also asked to carry the head of the sacerdotal animal from the hill to the residence of the *Siem* after the worship, as his predecessors were *gork* in ancient times during the period of their captivity in this State. Such traditions were found expressed in a symbolic way through their ceremonies.

The most important concern of the people was to maintain their mode of living together with their property and other means of subsistence. They worshipped him so that he might prevent the evil spirits from doing any harm and may in addition grant them bumper crops. To be recipient of such a favour, they approached their god U Shilling with gifts and sacrifices. It is not very surprising to be considered as one of their deified ancestors but his important position in the Khasi problems enabled him to have some priority in their worship. The offering of *shid-bong* (rice) with a yellow goat, moreover, revealed his amiable and benevolent nature as the malignant ones get exterminated inevitably with black animals. U Shilling was invoked simultaneously with other deities and ancestors, with this hope, that all the deities would pool their supernatural strength in fighting the evil spirits before the latter were able to cause any harm to their crops or to induce in any way the fertility of their fields.

It would be interesting to refer here about the presentation of *shid-bong* (rice) of meat from various parts of the sacerdotal animal. It may be a case of appeasement by serving him with some food but there seems to be something

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796 magical in each gift. The Khani dances being made of departed members,
782 are anthropomorphic in nature, have all the qualities of an ordinary human
769 being. The worshippers believe that the dances may also have their strength
776 in course of time which can be augmented only by offering suitable sacrifices.
182 They presented pieces of meat to wonder in them the supernatural
power which are concentrated or lodged in those regions of the sacrificial
animal, from where they were taken out. It is a case of reciprocal help between
the deity and the devotee so that on attaining their normal strength, they
would fulfil their request.

796 The Khani people while participating in the celebration gave vent to their
769 emotion through their traditional cries. It could not be definitely established
182 whether these were any indication of frightening the evil spirits but on the other
hand, those were intended to cheer the Niam, musicians, and the respective
units taking parts in the celebration. The musicians on another
occasion, were round the altar three times on reaching the top of the hill. The
members of the Niam's house similarly performed a sacred dance round the
(649) five pieces of central hall (Shiur) to the same number of times. This odd number
(801) of three seemed to be an auspicious one. The exact cause for such a reverential
attitude to this figure may be to pay respect to their primal ancestors
(Ka Isakhi), her husband (U Thawlang) and her brother, i.e., first maternal
uncle (U Isakhi) who are considered highest amongst all the Khani deities.

796 The dancing is generally taken as secular part of religious functions, but the
535 Khani people considered them (except the last one) as sacred for the reason
182 that it is one of their methods of propitiating their deity. The people at times,
sacred certain meanings to them to rationalize their thinking. The dancing
inevitably put the participants into ecstasy to enable them to be in communion
with their supernatural beings, yet these are interpreted as a device to control
the spirits inside of its calm and quiet nature. The people even then enjoyed
them with this hope that these would prevent the invading spirits from spreading
disease. Owing to the location of the dances of the function at the time of
evening period, the dances of the unmarried girls may have some bearing on the
promotion of fertility of the soil. The custom of allowing Khani boys to dance
round the spiritess, with fly-dup in one of their hands may be to protect them
from the influence of the evil spirits.

The heads of the various units offered to the official presidence strictly
before they allowed a common man to take part in the dancing. The custom
of allowing two officials to dance, at a time, was in recognition to their equal
status. It had become a practice to follow at every stage of their function.
The presence of all the in-charges of this Assembly were essential to secure the
blessings of their deity on behalf of his subjects whom they represent in official
capacity in this festival. This is a suitable mechanism to foster unity and
solidarity among the people of the different units which is the main aim of
this celebration. This was found to be so when Khani people from all parts
of State were seen witnessing the dancing of the unmarried girls. The in-
formants on being asked to state the reason of permitting the spiritess only in
this dance, came out with an interesting fact about the ancient Khani tradi-
tion. The dance used to offer at one time, an opportunity to the youngsters
of the Royal families in selecting their brides. A heli-heli with a girl was
equally thrown at a girl and the men going round them, remained as witness
of this incident. This explanation received some support from the
frequent utterances (rong-rong) by the public, expressing a desire to run away
with a girl dancing with graceful style.

796 The celebration can be taken up as a solidarity rite. The performance is
182 all the more essential for the purpose of security without which the people

January, 1956]

BANERJEE : KHASI FESTIVAL OF POMBLANG

59

could not be in a position to divert their attention to the problems of basic amenities and other necessities in their life. This is expressed through rituals which are maintained through tradition and transmitted from generation to generation. A proper performance of the ritual ensures prosperity. 796
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The maternal uncle occupies a very important position in the social life of the Khasi community. He acts as a manager of the family and his opinion is always sought for in any matter of social implications. He is thus honoured and respected by all the members of the house. In spite of the matrilineal set up of their society, the men are given honourable position in the affairs of the family. Their role has been given due recognition in their various customs and rites. The uncle (mother's brother) as also husbands in some exceptional cases, are always remembered by the living members of the house for their wisdom and sagacity. They are thus deified and are prayed by them to bestow all possible help to tide over their period of crisis. The Khasi pantheons to whom the people in general pay due reverence, are considered to have led similar life as prevalent in their present society. Thus the various rites and ceremonies that are observed, expressing clearly the duties, nature and obligations for these deities, are simply a reflection of the Khasi way of life. The general pattern of social structure has been found to be projected unconsciously through their religious worship and these celebrations are of course of great value to the local inhabitants as it re-infuses certain cultural features so characteristic of this tribe. 593
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